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Tobacco farmers need to look for blue mold

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Tobacco farmers are on the lookout for blue mold as more cases in central and eastern Kentucky - including one in Boyle County and two in Mercer County - are confirmed.

To make a bad thing worse, weather forecasts call for rain and overcast skies, perfect mold weather, during the next two weeks. The North American Plant Disease Forecast Center predicts high risks for tobacco plants this week.

Experts are urging farmers to scout their fields for signs of mold and to apply preventive fungicide treatments to their crops.

"It's paying to have your guard up," said Kenny Seebold, a University of Kentucky extension pathologist for tobacco and commercial vegetables.

Two fields in Mercer County were infected and there are other cases in Boyle, Adair, Bath, Bourbon, Carter, Greenup, Magoffin, Menifee, Morgan, Warren and Wolfe counties.

The case in Boyle can be traced to tobacco plugs bought from Florida. Seebold had another case in an eastern Kentucky county rooted in Florida plants. He remembered seeing Florida products on a Boyle County farm and quickly called Boyle Extension Agent Jerry Little.

Working with speed to identify and control incidents of blue mold is an integral part of making sure it doesn't spread, Seebold explained. The other part is for farmers to remain vigilant.

Blue mold is caused by the microorganism *Peronospora tabacina*. After a spore lands on a plant it can explode within three days, Seebold said. The mold spreads in damp, shady weather. Recent sunny weather has been interlaced with a day or two of rain and cloudy skies. These interludes have allowed the blue mold to linger around, Seebold said.

Farmers lost little from blue mold last year, but it has been devastating. An outbreak in 1996 cost growers about \$200 million.

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